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AUTHOR Cooney, James P.
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ABSTRACT

English teachers must actively work to preserve the humanistic content of their courses and assure the acceptance of students' needs, not only to promote skill development, but also to foster clear thinking about the great ideas of the past and the problems of the present. The achievement of these goals implies an active role in the politics of the community college; the acceptance of positions of actual decisionmaking such as chairmanships, deanships and even presidencies. A program inaugurated at the Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh offers a Doctor of Arts degree in English specifically designed for teachers in two year colleges, and focusing on issues in teaching, research, and the perpetuation of the humanities. (KS)

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ENGLISH, POWER AND DECISION MAKING IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Paper Prepared for the Conference on College Composition and Communication

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

March - 1976

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James P. Cooney
Assistant Professor of English
Montgomery County Community College
Blue Bell, Pennsylvania

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My task today is to address the relationship between the English teacher and the administrative structure of the community college. I hope to suggest that the current influence of the humanities in our society needs to be strengthened. I will further suggest that the modern English teacher can play a decisive role in such a process only if he is willing to become more active in influencing the administrative decisions of his college.

Permit me, at the outset, the personal observation that it is only because the college I presently serve has an enlightened administration, sympathetic to humanistic concerns and already engaged in actively resolving the problems I will consider, that I am capable of developing the observations that follow. Indeed, it is because I have already approached Utopia, that I am so enthused about communicating the nature of its boundaries to you. And let me assure you that the presence in our audience today, of my Academic Dean and Department Chairman has in no way prompted this apologia.

There is much evidence of the need for our kind of influence in the development and implementation of programs in the community college. English courses have become the central vehicle for the influence of the humanities o

the modern student. And it is the humanities which instill respect for the opinions of others, a sensitivity to the varieties of human experience, and a concern for the ethical implications of human action. I don't wish to belabor the sorry lessons of the last decade of our national experience, but we, as educators, cannot for a moment ignore them. Whether it's the spectacle of Dean Rusk telling the peace activists it was the clergy's task, not his, to be concerned with moral matters in connection with Vietnam; the C.I.A. willingness to assasinate foreign leaders in the name of Americanism; or Jeb Magruder's pathetic confession that he and his cohorts had "lost their moral compasses," the evidence is ample that the one thing American education has failed to do is to communicate values that will sustain their adherents through the challenges of a complex life. Nor is this problem confined to those in the centers of power in our country. Perhaps some of you have been the victims of a garage mechanic who charged for an unneeded repair; a notary who imposed a $10.00 fee for filling out a form, while failing to tell you you could easily do it yourself; or an administrator who seemed more concerned with the rules he enforced than with the people he served.

We have all observed with frustration the tragedy of divided marriages and alienated generations caused by individuals incapable of recognizing the validity of a point of view other than their own and respecting it. Few of us can deny as we peer out at Bicentennial America that Magruder

was right; moral compasses are at a premium and we all suffer because of it. If we are to forge the kind of society in which people can be genuinely secure in their everyday relationships with their fellows, we must accept the responsibility to see that every person who passes through our institutions has been exposed not only to the skills necessary to become a productive wage-earner, but to the ideas and ideals he needs to become a thoughtful, decent and tolerant human being.

Yet, as the readers of Change magazine's symposium on the humanities know, the leaders of our disciplins feel strongly that the influence of the humanities is imperiled in our current educational and social structures. If we are to reverse this trend and begin to regain the position of influence we should have, more of us, at times perhaps against our preference, will have to accept administrative roles or quasi-administative responsibilities within our institutions. We must, however, be hard nosed about this. As CCNY Dean Theodore Gross has insisted, we cannot "sentimentalize the issue." The problem must be met head on, by humanists concerned with the quality of life, and determined to articulate their goals and implement them.

In the community college, especially, a combination of circumstances has led to the development of programs which involve minimal exposure to the humanities. Time and budget restrictions, educational theory and the beaureaucracy which implements it, and empathy for student preferences have all played their part. Money is scarce, we are told, and there simply is not enough to support a range of literature courses — those that are offered frequently must have impossibly large enrollments of 30 - 40 or even more per section. Some administrators, well schooled in behavioral psychology insist that the only valuable course experience is the one with measurable objectives; and with this prejudice they have difficulty accepting the

worth of many of our courses. And some students, stung by previous bad experiences with English, and possessed of a vision which focuses only on immediate needs, often resist taking courses not directly related to career goals. Pragmatic faculty members sometimes support such student views.

These forces are formidable ones and if they are to be put in perspective, English teachers must begin to become more active in the development of curricula, courses and programs. We cannot afford the luxury of our professional predecessors-retiring into our own research and other interests, once our teaching responsibilities have been met. The situation calls for a new kind of college English teacher, one who joins committees, not just to have something to put into his evaluation folder, but to be able to use his powers of persuasion and articulation to protect and extend the influence of his discipline-- not for reasons of self interest, but because of his firm belief that what he has to offer is something that every student needs. The English teacher should be there when the Director of Nursing argues that his students don't have time for literature; he should be there when the Business Administation Chairman argues that one English course (preferably Business English) is sufficient for Accounting majors. He should be there to assist the Dean of Continuing Education in developing programs to serve the larger community. He should be there confident that his voice is an important one — the only generalist in the midst of specialists, often the only humanist in the midst of educationists.

In recent years, we have witnessed a transformation in administrative attitudes toward the English Composition sequence. The new emphasis is on the development of very specific, skill-oriented goals, for our Comp courses. Some argue that all that is really important about English Composition is that the student develop facility with grammar, spelling, punctuation,

usage and organization. We are all aware of the importance of basic skills and recognize our resposibility to teach them. But we also know that in the absence of literature course requirements and minimal exposure to other humanities courses, in community colleges, English Composition meets a crucial need which can be met nowhere else in many students' programs. It is the one course in which the student can be expected to integrate ideas, consider diverse and tangential issues, probe the complexity of a wide range of problems and share his insights with others. To underrate the importance of these dimensions of the English Comp experience seems to me to contribute to the extension of what Leslie Fielder has called "the endemic disease of our era— the failure to connect."

Which brings us back to Magruder's metaphor of the lost compass. We English teachers have the distinct capability of providing both our students and our colleagues with the ability "to connect" and with that ability perhaps we can all begin to reclaim our moral compasses. The root cause of this disease may well be in the very bureaucratic structures we have permitted to evolve and empowered to determine the character of the modern educational experience. In America, especially, educators have sought to develop efficiency, promote accountability, require tangible productivity. Such objectives facilitate cost effectiveness reports and satisfy our instinct for order, but whether they really advance the cause of human understanding and prepare students to lead decent lives, remains a very unsettled question. One of the most reflective and perceptive thinkers of our time, Thomas Merton, once observed that,

> "We live on the brink of disaster because we do not know how to let life alone. We do not respect the living and fruitful contradictions and paradoxes of which true life is full. We destroy them, or try to destroy them, with our obsessive and absurd systemazitations."

How to break the concern for the superficial, the over emphasis on

the measurable, may well be the major challenge to our profession today. Not long ago, I engaged in a debate with a student who was irate at having failed a Composition course because he had missed four weeks of classes. His papers, he argued, showed steady improvement and earned him satisfactory grades, but the teacher had "failed" him because of his erratic class attendence. Without much success, I tried to explain to the student that there's a lot more to a composition course than what we attempt to measure in periodic papers. Indeed, I argued, many of the values derived from classroom lectures and discussions, while they could not possibly be measured, might ultimately be more important than the writing skills which he sought to emphasize.

While I lost that debate with the student, I feel that I cannot afford to lose it with my colleagues. If they, too, reach the point where they equate the value of a college English course with the measurable skills it fosters, and ignore less tangible dimensions, we may indeed reach that state that Emerson pessimistically forecasted in The American Scholar when "American colleges will recede in their public importance, while they grow richer every year."

Only active and involved English teachers can forestall this development in the modern community college. Specifically, we must actively work to preserve the integrity of the courses we teach, assuring that we meet students' needs not only for skill development but for exposure to the values of clear thinking about the great ideas of the past and the pressing problems of the present. Daniel Berrigan has observed that one of the most frustrating characteristics of formal education is that every time the classroom discussion starts to get interesting, the teacher cuts it short. It is

the responsibility of the modern English teacher to prevent such a problem from becoming institutionalized.

Some of us will be able to deal with these problems by becoming more active in quasi-administrative participation in the affairs of our colleges; but others among us may have to do even more. We may have to accept positions of actual decision making - chairmanships, Deanships - even Presidencies in an effort to see that genuine control of our institutions is not left solely to those with business or education backgrounds. Most of you, like myself, have probably cringed at any suggestion that you leave the classroom to take on the burdens of a 12 month contract and more meetings in a week than you care to attend in a year. Nevertheless, the stakes are very high — they involve not only the future of jobs in our profession; they involve the tone and quality of our life in this country; indeed, they involve our future on this planet. If you have the organizational skills which you try to teach your students; if you have the articulative finesse our profession so often elicits; if you have the moral sensitivity so necessary to the times; then you might well consider that the contribution you could make as an administrator might rival in long range importance the influence you are having as a classroom teacher.

We need administrators with solid humanistic backgrounds to meet the challenges of redefining the role of the humanities in a mass communication society. Such administrators will have to find ways to break down barriers between the college and the wider community - to make continuing exposure to the humanities a fundamental part of every community's life style, not only for post high-school adolescents but for post college adults. Such an objective is going to require imaginative approaches, creative innovations and, not the least important, persuasive salesmanship.

At this point, permit me a few words about the program we on the panel are all involved in. Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh has inaugurated a Doctor of Arts program in English, specifically designed for teachers in two year colleges. The program brings together experienced professionals from around the country for further study in our discipline and the opportunity to explore related problems and issues. It seems to me that such a program is very useful to the development of the kind of English teacher needed in the modern community college. Our studies are in English, but our approach is practical. We emphasize teaching; but we do not ignore research — nor do we ignore the many other responsibilities such as those I have just addressed, which are so much a part of the life of a modern English faculty member. If you share my concern for producing more active and involved English teachers, you might want to explore the usefulness of such a program. If you wish to take on a genuine administrative role at your institution, and do not yet have a terminal degree, you should be particularly interested in this kind of a program. While the program was not designed to produce administrators (indeed none of us entered it with any intentions in that direction), it is the kind of experience which can help the modern teacher develop those skills and resources which will make him a more vital force in his institution, whether in the classroom, the committee room, or the administrator's chair.

We English teachers in the community colleges of the 70's are surrounded by very pragmatic people and complex social and institutional forces. The combination could serve to reduce our role to its most utilitarian and measureable dimensions. It is our task to accept the challenge of training our students to function effectively in their jobs and careers, while at the same time, insisting that we be permitted to fufill the equally impor-

tant goal of helping them to become critical and aware personalities capable of confronting, assessing and evaluating the problems and concerns of their day. Ralph Nader recently observed that the problem in America today is that "...we ask people to think instead of asking them to believe." And Nader went on to say that "history has always gone to those who ask people to believe."

Our profession - our courses - our approaches are particularly qualified to challenge people to both think and believe as they prepare themselves for the problems of modern life.

With full confidence, then, that our approaches are sound, our programs valuable and our courses vital to any genuine effort to create a humane and successful society, let us ready ourselves to accept whatever tasks or positions of responsibility seem necessary to achieving our goals. If the success of American institutions depends upon an educated citizenry, as Thomas Jefferson suggested almost 200 years ago, those of us involved in this newest experiment in extending education to the masses - in the community college have a special obligation to assure that the education the people receive is genuinely designed to assure them success, not only in their careers but in their everyday lives.